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ABSTRACT

The Motherhood Inventory (MI) is a 40-item questionnaire developed to study attitudes toward motherhood and the motherhood myth. It includes items related to the control of reproduction, abortion, adoption, single motherhood, male-female relationships, and idealized and punitive attitudes toward mothers. The MI was investigated using 301 subjects drawn largely from undergraduate and graduate students at an Eastern Catholic University and their parents. Comparisons with scores on the Spence-Helmreich Attitudes toward Women Scale (AWS) revealed that the sample was more liberal than the original AWS sample. Men held significantly more traditional attitudes toward motherhood than women. Younger subjects also agreed more with the myth of motherhood. Catholics more than non-Catholics rejected abortion and supported the primacy of the woman's role as mother. Education produced the most pronounced effect on attitudes toward motherhood, with college graduates holding more liberal attitudes. (HLM)

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The Motherhood Inventory: A Questionnaire for Studying Attitudes toward Motherhood

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Abstract

Traditional attitudes toward motherhood reflect many contradictions. The Motherhood Inventory (MI), a 40 item questionnaire, has been developed to study attitudes toward motherhood and the motherhood myth. The MI includes items relating to the control of reproduction, abortion, adoption, single motherhood, male-female relationships, and idealized and punitive attitudes toward mothers. The 301 subjects in this study were drawn largely from undergraduate and graduate students at an Eastern Catholic University and their parents. Comparisons with scores on the Spence-Helmreich Attitudes toward Women Scale (AWS) revealed that the sample was more liberal than the original AWS sample. Men were found to hold significantly more traditional attitudes toward motherhood than women. Younger subjects also agreed more with the myth of motherhood. Catholics more than non-Catholics rejected abortion and supported the primacy of the woman's role as mother. Education produced the most pronounced effect on attitudes toward motherhood with more liberal attitudes held by those who were college graduates. The sample is being extended to further develop the MI scale.

The Motherhood Inventory: A Questionnaire for Studying Attitudes toward Motherhood

Rachel T. Hare-Mustin and Patricia C. Broderick

Although recent research has focused on attitudes toward women in their more liberated roles (Blanchard, Becker, & Bristow, 1976; Spence & Helmreich, 1972), there has yet to be a major study of attitudes toward motherhood, that state intimately associated with women. It would seem that on the path toward liberation, the traditional concepts of women as mothers may be the last to be relinquished. The fact that attitudes toward motherhood, that most sacrosanct and idealized of women's roles, may not have kept pace with attitude changes toward women's other roles reflects the conflicting ideas which have been part of the myth of motherhood.

Society is now beginning to promote the rights of women to receive equal pay for their work, but this right somehow does not apply to the housewife and mother. Her "right" is to have children and to stay at home to raise them (Russo, 1976); she is responsible for how they turn out (Abramowitz, 1977; Hare-Mustin, 1978). Although women may work, the common view is that their jobs should be subservient to their principle child bearing/rearing function. It is not surprising that the vast majority of American working women (70%) are in fields that conflict least with this essential role, viz. teaching, nursing, social services, and secretarial work (Tangri, 1972). The privilege of having children continues to be viewed traditionally as completely fulfilling despite a few realistic appraisals of the hard work and problems involved in mothering (Bernard, 1974; Minturn & Lambert, 1964; Rollin, 1970).

A review of recent literature on motherhood reveals the wealth of contradictory attitudes toward that state. For example, Blumenthal (1975), in arguing that the duties and burdens of motherhood have been stressed over its pleasures, claims that having a child gives a girl (sic) emotional security, that men are attracted to women because of their maternal capacity, that "sex was never meant to be enjoyed independently of the price humans were expected to pay for it" (p. 107). Rich (1976) points out that the idea of the mother is associated first with power, and only secondarily with warmth, that motherhood is so idealized that all mothers are more or less guilty of having failed their children, that a woman's love for her children comes before her love for her mate. Lott (1973) observes that our culture holds childbearing and childrearing in low esteem. In Lidz's (1968) view, the sense of fulfillment for a wife comes only with the creation of a new life. McBride (1973) challenges the myth of motherhood, pointing out that motherhood represents man's projection of an ideal, a set of behaviors and hopes that no flesh and blood woman could ever meet.

Only a powerful myth could encompass as many conflicting ideals as the myth of motherhood does. The issue of the good mother versus the bad mother undoubtedly influences policy and practices related to procreation, breast feeding, abortion, adoption, child care, and the employment of women outside the home. One obvious disparity is that society's ideali-

zation of motherhood has not been extended to unwed mothers and mothers who abort or give their children up for adoption. The woman who chooses an abortion is considered a bad mother because she rejects her child. But the mother who gives a child for adoption may also be considered rejecting. In adoption, the natural mother is often looked upon as promiscuous; subsequent attitudes toward the adopted child may be powerfully influenced by the suspicion that the child comes from "bad seed" (Toussieng, 1962). It appears that it is not motherhood that is idealized but only motherhood under patriarchy, that is, within the socially acceptable confines of marriage (Rich, 1976).

How widely is the myth of motherhood held? What are its various aspects? Recent research on the psychology of women has examined attitudes toward women and their roles (Spence & Helmreich, 1972), but has not examined in detail attitudes toward motherhood itself. The present study reports the initial development of the Motherhood Inventory (MI) and the relation of liberal and traditional attitudes toward women to attitudes toward motherhood.

Method

Subjects

The 301 subjects inluded 177 females and 124 males, undergraduate and graduate students at an Eastern Catholic University and their parents. Ages ranged from 17 to 69 with a mean of 29 (SD = 12.28). Religious preferences indicated 66% Catholic, 14% Protestant, 9% Jewish, 7% no religion, and 3% other. Forty percent of the subjects were married. Thirty-one percent had children. Of those with children, the mean number was 3.7 children which probably reflects the high proportion of Catholics in the sample. Age and sex were not significantly associated but age and religion were with the younger group more likely to be Catholic (r = .30). The Catholic group tended to have less education (r = .42) which could be a function of their being younger, since age and education were highly associated (r = .68). Married subjects tended to be older (r = .76), to have more education (r = .45), and to be Catholic (r = .27).

Instruments

A short (25-item) version of the Spence-Helmreich Attitudes toward Women Scale (AWS) was used to assess the degree to which the subjects held traditional or liberal views toward women (Spence, Helmreich, & Stapp, 1973). This short form has been found to correlate at .95 or above with the full (55-item) version (Spence & Helmreich, 1972) for groups of male and female students and groups of their parents. The short form consists of 25 statements that describe attitudes toward the role of women in society. Subjects respond in a four point Likert style with "agree strongly," "agree mildly," "disagree mildly," and "disagree strongly." Each item is given a score from 0 to 3, with 0 representing the most traditional and 3 the most contemporary, profeminist response. Scores are summed for a total score.

The Motherhood Inventory (MI) developed by the authors consists of 40 items to which the subjects respond as above. The initial item pool was generated from sentence completions to motherhood stems and reports of research on sex roles and mothering. The final items were based on responses by 12 judges and balanced for positive and negative direction. Topics included in the MI are decisions about having children, birth control, pregnancy, delivery, breast feeding, abortion, adoption, single motherhood, sexuality, promiscuity, child rearing responsibility, and personal fulfillment. The Background Information Questionnaire included questions on age, sex, residence, religion, marital status, number of children, respondent's birth order, academic interests, and professional status.

Procedure

The subjects were given the Attitudes toward Women Scale followed by the Motherhood Inventory, and then the Background Information Questionnaire. The materials were presented as one package using the instructions for the AWS with the MI items numbered sequentially beginning with item 26.

Results

Relation of MI to AWS

The scores on the AWS ranged from 18 to 75 with a mean of 54.99 (*SD* = 13.20). This mean is higher than the 44.80 for males and 50.26 for females at the University of Texas and the 39.22 and 41.86 for their fathers and mothers, respectively (Spence, Helmreich, & Stapp, 1973). Significant differences on the AWS were found for different groups with females more liberal than males, older subjects more liberal than younger, college graduates more liberal than those with less than a college degree, non-Catholics more liberal and Catholics, and married more liberal than unmarried. (Table 1.)

Responses to 32 of the 40 items on the MI correlated significantly with the AWS score ($p < .001$). The highest correlations ($r > .50$) indicated that the AWS profeminist score was negatively related to MI items on the idealization of motherhood such as:

A woman who doesn't want children is unnatural.
A woman who is true to her basic maternal instincts would not give a child up for adoption.
The true mission of women is the welfare of men and children.
If women want to be respected, they should try to be better mothers.
The reward for a mother is knowing she has done her duty.
Men must decide how far they will let women's liberation go.

Attitudes toward Motherhood

Women's control over reproduction. Responses to many of the items on birth control on the Motherhood Inventory were quite liberal; 86% felt that birth control information and services should be made available to all women. Almost all subjects (92%) indicated that women should have the right to withhold or initiate sexual activity within marriage. A

majority (60%) did not agree that people should be guided by the teachings of religion in matters of sexual behavior. Half the subjects felt a woman had the right to have a child whether she was married or not.

Attitudes toward abortion tended to split the group. Only 13% felt that any woman who would have an abortion must be unfit to be a good mother, but half the group felt a woman should bear an unwanted child rather than have an abortion. Fifty-seven percent felt it was natural for a woman to want an abortion if there were a fetal deformity. The same proportion recognized that legal abortion was safer than childbirth; 43% did not. In response to the statement that it should be the woman's right to decide about abortion without the man's permission, 39% agreed. This is at odds with the fact that 65% agreed with the more general principle, that a woman has the right to make the decision herself about having more children.

Adoption. Subjects felt that it was more acceptable to give up an unwanted child for adoption (61%) than have an abortion (49%). Furthermore, 64% thought that giving a child for adoption in no way indicated a failure to be true to one's basic maternal instincts. About half seemed to accept single motherhood since they did not agree that an unwed mother who gives her child for adoption rather than raising it alone demonstrates true caring for her child. As for attitudes toward adopted children, 31% felt adopted children came from poor unwed girls, 21% thought they were born out of wedlock, and 15% believed they were given for adoption because something was wrong with them.

Punitive aspects of motherhood. Almost half the subjects, 45%, agreed that women who wanted babies should be expected to pay for them in extra work and sacrifice. A similar proportion, 42%, felt that women who had abortions or gave their children up for adoption would always bear a heavy burden of guilt. A third of the subjects felt that if an unmarried woman got pregnant, it was her own fault. However, only 4% felt a single woman who became pregnant should marry a man she didn't love for the sake of the child. Twenty-one percent felt that being pregnant made a woman's body unattractive. Seventeen percent felt that if a woman died from an illegal abortion it was her own fault for wanting an abortion.

Caring for men. Most of the responses relating to men tended to be contemporary. Only 21% felt that women's true mission was the welfare of men and children. Half the subjects thought that it was the love and altruism of mothers that had made men's achievements possible. Conversely, a smaller percentage, 26%, thought that by taking responsibility for supporting women men had made it easy for them. There were 18% who agreed that men must decide how far they will let women's liberation go.

Women's identity and motherhood. In general, there was a rejection of the idea that a woman's identity depended on her mothering functions. Approximately three quarters of the subjects disagreed that: the mother-child relationship is the essential human relationship, if women want to be respected they should try to be better mothers, and the true mission of women is the welfare of men and children, as mentioned above. Sixty-two percent disagreed that the reward for a mother was knowing she had done her duty.

The myth of motherhood. Attitudes toward the role of motherhood did not support the myth. Subjects overwhelmingly disagreed (88%) that the woman who did not want children was selfish or unnatural. Only 22% agreed with the idea that having a baby was totally fulfilling or that no child was unwanted for a normal woman. Half the subjects felt it was understandable that a mother might not like all her children, and 38% felt that most mothers were happiest once their children were in school. The realities of mothering were also reflected in the fact that three quarters of the group felt that motherhood was the hardest job there is. In terms of the physical aspects of motherhood, two-thirds of the sample felt that breast feeding was not acceptable in public. Clearly breast feeding is a more widely held taboo than negative attitudes toward a pregnant woman's body which were held by 21%.

A majority (59%) agreed that most working mothers could raise their children as well as mothers who did not work. There was overwhelming rejection (87%) of the idea that a woman who does not have children should fulfill her maternal nature through teaching, nursing, social work, or similar occupations.

A third of the subjects said they would not want to grow up to be like their mothers.

Differences in Attitudes by Age, Sex, Religion, Education, and Marital Status

The significance of such factors as age, sex, religion, education, and marital status was tested by use of chi square tests with the Yates correction. Reported differences are significant at $p < .001$ (1 df). No significant differences were found in responses for subjects with and without children, or on the basis of the respondent's birth order in his or her family of origin.

Age and the motherhood myth. The younger group (age 17 - 23) was much more accepting of the motherhood myth than the older group (age 24 - 69). They were more likely to idealize the love and altruism of mothers, less likely to support a woman's right to an abortion, and more likely to see the reward for a mother as having done her duty. The older group seemed more realistic and tended to recognize that a mother might not like all her children. The older group was less likely to agree that motherhood was the hardest job there is. (See Table 2.)

Female/male attitudes. Men's responses were much more conservative than women's as represented by the fact that 35% of the men felt men must decide how far to let women's liberation go but only 5% of the women agreed. Men were more likely to feel that a woman who did not want children was unnatural and that women should be better mothers if they wanted to be respected. Men were less willing than women to allow women to control their reproduction. While a majority of the women felt that a working mother could raise her children as well as a mother who did not work, less than half the men agreed. (See Table 3.)

Religion and reproduction. Significant differences between Catholics and non-Catholics were primarily in the area of a woman's right to control her reproduction. Only a quarter of the Catholics felt a woman had the

right to decide about an abortion without the man's permission compared with two-thirds of the non-Catholics. Slightly more Catholics (30%) felt it was better to abort than bear an unwanted child. Half the Catholics agreed it was natural to want to abort in the case of a fetal deformity compared with three-quarters of the non-Catholics. More than half the Catholics thought childbirth was safer than legal abortion while only a few of the non-Catholics did.

Almost half the Catholics felt people should be guided by religion in sexual matters and invoked duty and guilt in relation to motherhood compared with less than a quarter of the non-Catholics. However, 43% of the Catholics felt every woman whether married or not had a right to have a child. Seventy percent of the non-Catholics supported that right. (See Table 4.)

Education and attitudes toward motherhood. Subjects currently in college or with less than a college degree were significantly more accepting of the motherhood myth than those who had graduated from college or had some post-college education. They were more likely to see motherhood as being totally fulfilling as well as the hardest job there is. They were less likely to find it understandable that a mother might not like all her children. In contrast, college graduates were more liberal about the woman's right to control her own reproduction than those without a college degree. More educated subjects were more likely to find breast feeding acceptable and were less punitive toward women who had abortions. Only a quarter of the college graduates felt religion should guide sexual matters compared with half of those with less education. (See Table 5.)

Marital status. The few significant differences that were found between married or formerly married subjects and those never married indicated that married subjects were more liberal. Two thirds of the married group felt it was understandable that a mother might not like all her children compared with a third of the unmarried group. More than half the married group thought a woman should have the right to decide on an abortion without the man's permission but only one third of the unmarried did. Fifty-eight percent of the unmarried group felt it was the love and altruism of mothers that made men's achievements possible compared with a third of the never married group.

Discussion

Responses to the MI were found to be generally liberal and indicated only slight support for the motherhood myth. Three fourths of the MI items correlated significantly with scores on the AWS.

The present study concurs with other studies using the AWS in that women were generally found to be more liberal in their attitudes than were men. More conservative attitudes among male students were also found not only at the University of Texas (Spence & Helmreich, 1972) but at the University of Washington (Lunneborg, 1974) and among students at the University of Calgary in Canada (Loo & Logan, 1974).

Most of the issues that divided men and women on the MI were concerned with power and decision-making; that is, the right to decide on an abortion, to have more children, and to work while raising children. The stereotype of the full-time housewife as a completely fulfilling role was more likely to be rejected by women than by men. A difference that did not reach the .001 level of significance, but is related, is that more males than females tended to agree with the statement that the mother-child relationship is the essential human relationship.

The expectation that younger subjects would hold more liberal attitudes toward motherhood was not supported. Older subjects were significantly more liberal, possibly because the experience of marriage and/or motherhood tempers to some extent the idealistic views which support the myth. The fact that most of the younger subjects were Catholic could also contribute to the conservatism of this age group. The younger group differed significantly from the older group in that they viewed motherhood in terms of a demanding but ultimately rewarding duty to be embraced altruistically in order to promote men's achievements.

The differences between Catholics and non-Catholics lay primarily in the area of sexuality and reproduction. Other studies have consistently shown Catholics to be more traditional on these issues than members of other religious groups (Bogen, 1974; Eagly & Anderson, 1974; Hedderson, Hodgson, Bogan, & Crowley, 1974; Richardson & Fox, 1975; Haskell, 1977). Catholic responses indicated a strong rejection of abortion and a firm acceptance of the role of women as primarily that of mother.

The greatest number of significant differences in attitudes occurred as a function of differences in levels of education. Generally, those with less education supported the "myth of motherhood" and were conservative on issues of sex and reproduction. This finding is congruent with other research that has found education to have the most pronounced effect on sex-role attitudes overall (Mason & Bumpass, 1970). Few differences were found based on marital status. Married or formerly married subjects were more liberal than those who had never been married.

The research reported here represents the initial development of a scale to study attitudes toward motherhood, the Motherhood Inventory. The findings reported indicate that there are significant differences in the way different groups respond to various aspects of motherhood. A breader sample is currently being obtained which will provide the basis for further development of the MI as an instrument for assessing attitudes toward motherhood.

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Table 1

Mean Scores on the Attitudes toward Women Scale

Group	n[a]	M	SD	t
Males	11[illegible]	47.52	12.69	9.17*
Females	163	60.42	10.74	
Younger (17-23)	144	51.50	11.95	4.66*
Older (24-69)	131	58.67	13.54	
Undergraduate or less	166	49.87	12.36	8.81*
College degree or post-college	115	62.37	10.66	
Catholic	189	51.86	12.69	6.19*
Non-Catholic	88	61.77	11.76	
Unmarried	173	53.11	11.76	3.27*
Married or formerly married	105	58.36	14.83	

[a] Numbers vary due to some partial responses.

* $p < .001$, 2-tail

Table 2

Items Showing Significant Differences in Agreement by Age*

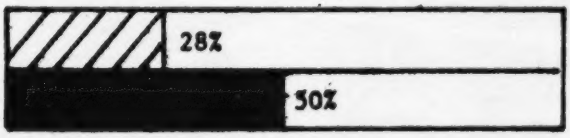
THE MYTH OF MOTHERHOOD

Motherhood is the hardest job there is

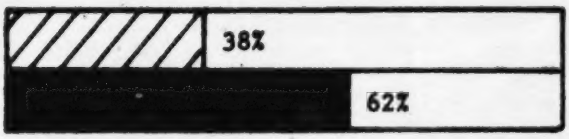
The love and altruism of mothers makes men's achievements possible.

DECISIONS CONCERNING ABORTION

A woman should have the right to abort without the man's permission.

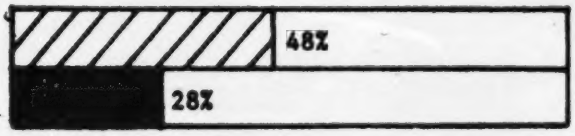


It makes sense to abort rather than to bear an unwanted child.

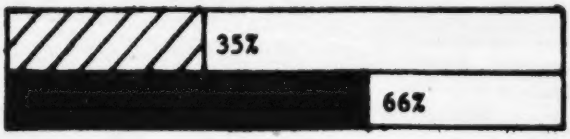


PUNITIVE ASPECTS OF THE MYTH

The reward for a mother is knowing she has done her duty.



It is understandable that a mother may not like all her children.



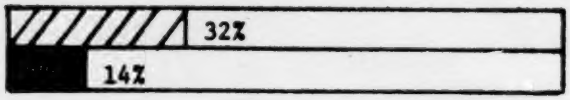
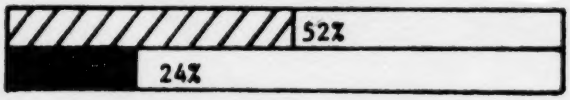
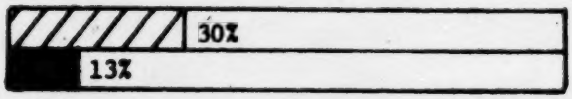
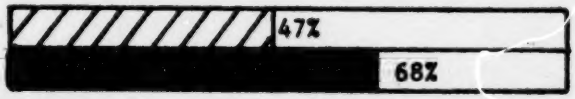
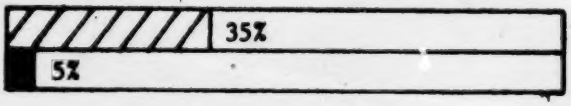
*Significant Differences: $p < .001$ (Chi square, 1 df)

Younger (Age 17-23) Older (Age 24-69)

Table 3

Items Showing Significant Differences in Agreement by Sex*

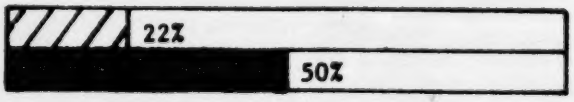
THE MYTH OF MOTHERHOOD

Having a baby fulfills a woman totally.	
A woman who doesn't want children is unnatural.	
A truly maternal woman would not give up a child for adoption.	
Women who want respect should be better mothers.	
Working mothers can raise children as well as non-working mothers.	
Men must decide how far women's liberation should go.	

CONTROL OF REPRODUCTION

Women have the right to decide about having more children.	

DECISIONS CONCERNING ABORTION

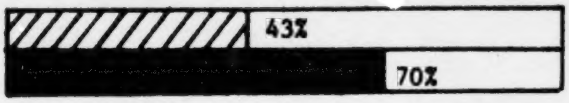
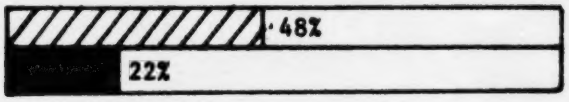
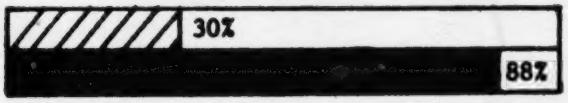
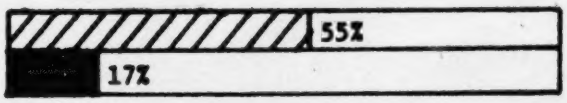
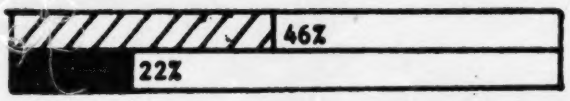
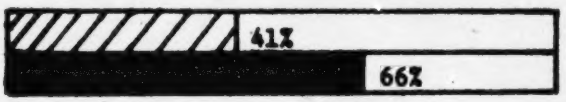
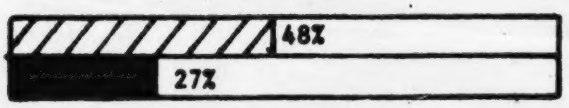
A woman should have the right to abort without the man's permission.	

*Significant Differences: $p < .001$ (Chi square, 1 df)

Male Female

Table 4

Items Showing Significant Differences in Agreement by Religion*

CONTROL OF REPRODUCTION	
Women have the right to decide about having more children.	
Every woman, married or not, has the right to have a child.	
People should be guided by the church in matters of sex.	
DECISIONS CONCERNING ABORTION	
A woman should have the right to abort without the man's permission.	
It makes sense to abort rather than to bear an unwanted child.	
Childbirth is safer than legal abortion.	
It is natural to want an abortion in the case of fetal deformity.	
PUNITIVE ASPECTS OF THE MYTH	
The reward for a mother is knowing she has done her duty.	
It is understandable that a mother may not like all her children.	
Women who abort or give up children for adoption will bear the burden of guilt.	

*Significant Differences: $p < .001$ (Chi square, 1 df)

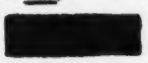
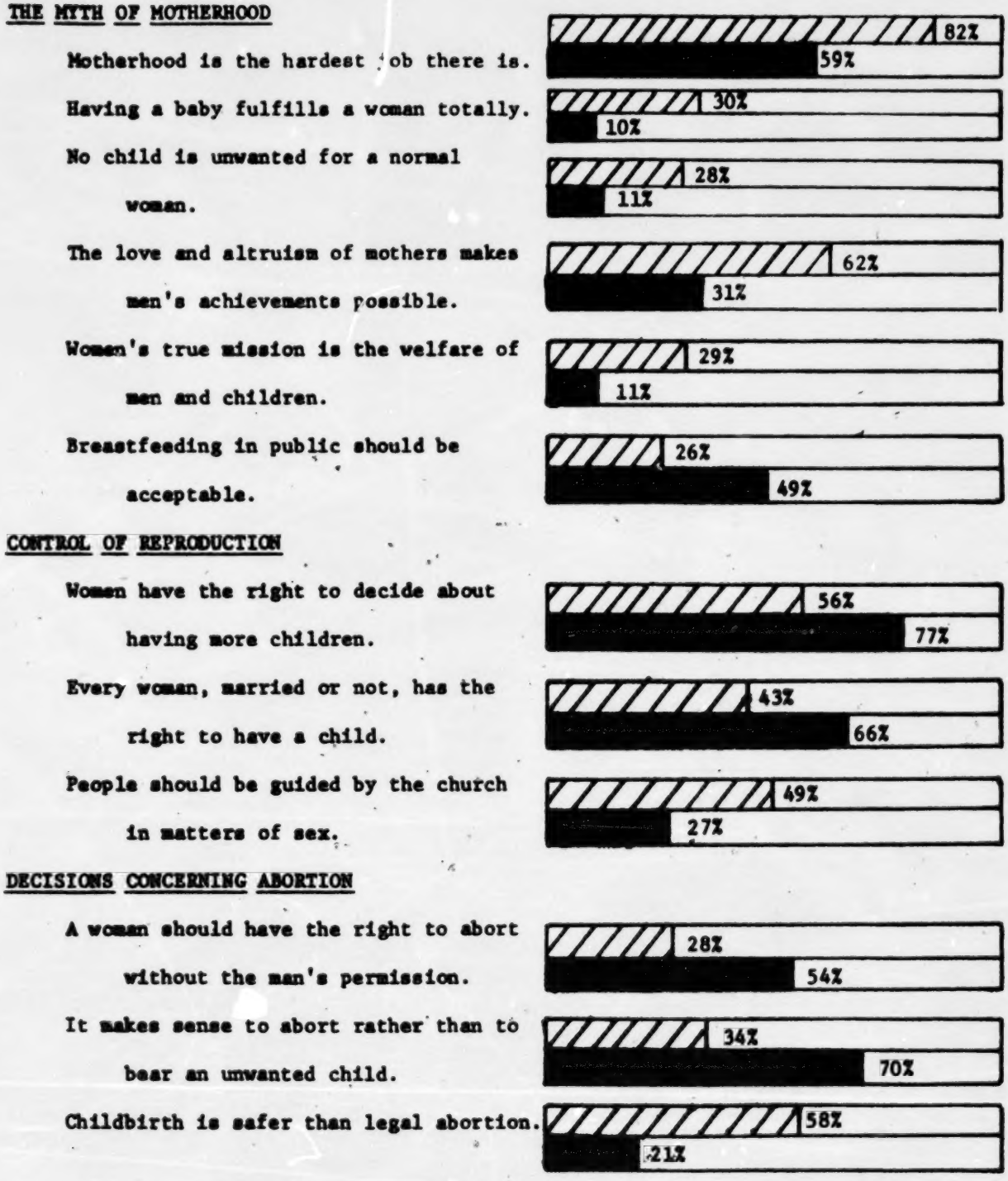
Catholic Non-Catholic 

Table 5

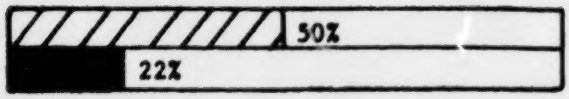
Items Showing Significant Differences in Agreement by Education *



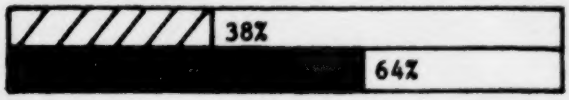
(continued)

PUNITIVE ASPECTS OF THE MYTH

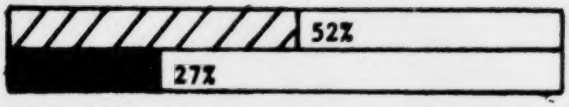
The reward for a mother is knowing she has done her duty.



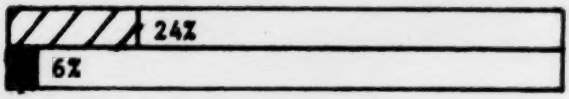
It is understandable that a mother may not like all her children.



Women who abort or give up children for adoption will bear the burden of guilt.



If a woman dies from an illegal abortion, it is her own fault.



*Significant Differences: $p < .001$ (Chi square, 1 df)